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ABSTRACT

Since all Agency for International Development (AID) projects require an evaluation component, AID's emphasis on assistance to agriculture and rural development projects ensures a continuing need for skilled and expert personnel to evaluate those projects. Intended for potential AID project evaluators, this guide uses experience gained from field work in Senegal, Rwanda, Togo, Mali, and the Sudan to identify five phases in project evaluation: qualification for and involvement on an evaluation team; pre-departure orientation to the project; hit the field running; expectations and surprises in the field; and, the exit. Examples or explanations are given for each phase. Recommendations emphasize the importance of: establishing a good reputation; gaining familiarity with the project and its strategy; maintaining objectivity and being a good listener; and conducting final briefing and preparing reports. (JMM)

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Lessons Learned From Evaluating African Agricultural Training Projects

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Lessons Learned From Evaluating African Agricultural Training Programs

All Agency for International Development (AID) projects require an evaluation component as an integral part of the project planning process. The evaluation effort is mandated by law (Section 125 of the Foreign Assistance Act) and serves as a key element in providing AID accountability to the U.S. Congress. Other evaluation objectives are to improve the quality, effectiveness, and impact of the AID assistance to developing countries. Evaluations are considered by AID personnel as critical events in the life of a project.

Given the emphasis of AID assistance to agricultural and rural development projects, there is a continuing need for skilled and experienced personnel in project evaluation. AID evaluations routinely draw on outside personnel resources to provide a cross-disciplinary expertise to the evaluation effort and to offer greater objectivity to the evaluation of specific projects. This dependence on outside consultants provides an opportunity for agricultural educators to become involved in the evaluation of specific agricultural training projects or of technical agricultural projects which have a significant training component. The technical agricultural background of agricultural educators and their expertise in education can

bring a fresh perspective to the project evaluation process.

That expertise, however, has to be translated into the framework of a donor agency evaluation procedure. It is the purpose of this presentation to share evaluation information based on the author's field experience in the evaluation of agricultural training projects in Senegal, Rwanda, Mali, Togo, and Sudan. The lessons learned from these experiences can be used as a basis for discussing the evaluation of agricultural training projects. These lessons are not necessarily hard and fast rules that should be applied to every situation. The lessons are based on experience and the list is not meant to be all-inclusive. Rather, five phases in project evaluation are identified and a lesson is applied to each phase.

Phase I: Qualifications for and Involvement on an Evaluation Team

Once the AID country mission has initiated work for a project evaluation, a consulting firm and/or AID Washington will be requested to put together an evaluation team that can provide fresh viewpoints from the team's collective specialized knowledge and familiarity with AID evaluation techniques. Qualifications for each team member are based on the need for specific technical expertise, language needs, knowledge of local conditions, and experience with similiar projects. For example, the Rwanda agricultural training project required technical specialists

in management information systems, vocational education, and agricultural education. Each of these people needed a FSI rating of 3 in French, experience in African training projects, and availability for a four week period in Rwanda. A list of candidates had to be compiled and sent to Rwanda for AID country mission approval.

How, then, can one actually get involved as a team member on the evaluation of an agricultural training project? The lesson to be learned is to be sure the consulting firms know who you are and that your qualifications meet the basic requirements needed to be part of an evaluation team. A corollary to this lesson is once on a team it is very important to do acceptable work. Word passes quickly among consulting firm recruitment personnel and a bad reputation will effectively prevent future work assignments. A good reputation from an initial assignment will likely result in involvement in several future evaluation assignments.

Phase II: The Pre-Departure Orientation to the Project

After selection to the evaluation team, the consultants are often handicapped by lack of familiarity with the project and the AID's specific agricultural strategy for the country. Without detailed project information the evaluator is likely to encounter many difficulties in the implementation of the evaluation. The consulting firm and/or the AID mission should

provide information on:

- Project background and history
- Sector goals and project goals
- Logical framework for the project
- Project operations
- Scope of evaluation
- Logistical support to be provided in-country
- Project output reports.

The consulting firm and AID Washington personnel should have access to at least a portion of these materials and provide copies to the evaluation team. The pre-departure orientation should emphasize the distribution and review of these documents. A pre-departure orientation meeting also provides an opportunity for members of the evaluation team to meet, to discuss evaluation methodology and strategy, and to simply get to know one another on a more personal basis. The pre-departure meeting really signals the start of an intensive several week journey whereby evaluation team members will be concerned with the evaluation during their working, eating, and sleeping hours.

The pre-departure orientation can set the tone for the entire evaluation process. Unfortunately, these meetings are rarely held due to the difficulty of bringing the evaluation team together from diverse geographic locations and from the

busy schedules of team members who are trying to make last minute adjustments to being away from their regular duties for the evaluation time period. Another complication is that delays in the departure are common and once a date is set there is a pressing need for the evaluation team to arrive in-country the "next day".

Two important lessons are to be learned from this phase. First, stress the need for a pre-departure orientation to study the background of the project. Secondly, remain flexible.

Phase III: Hit the Field Running

Upon arrival in-country a number of events will take place in quick succession (immediately after an all night trans-Atlantic flight with a four hour layover in Paris or London). After checking into the hotel and dropping off your luggage initial meetings with AID personnel, host country officials, and project team members will take place. AID officials will be interested in knowing the evaluation methodology that is to be used and will be able to provide a general picture of how the project fits into overall AID country strategy. It is important at this time to clarify project related questions stemming from the review of the project background documents. It is also important to determine what support the evaluation team will receive from AID (office space, vehicle, drivers, typist, etc.),

who the AID contact person is, and the time and format of the final briefing.

The second group of people to be visited will probably be the host country officials. This initial meeting is more as a formality than it is for project substance. The value of this meeting is getting to know some of the key actors in the project from a host country perspective.

Project team members will be the third group to be met and are the most important information source for the evaluation process. These people are the key actors in the actual implementation of project activities and are the source for most of the detailed information needed for the evaluation. They will provide detailed reports, assist in arranging meetings between the evaluation team members and students, farmers, and teachers of agriculture who are affected by the project. The project team members will also accompany the evaluation team members on visits to project sites throughout the country. The project team members cooperation and degree of preparation for the evaluation are vital factors in the success of the evaluation.

The lesson to be learned from this phase of the evaluation is to do your homework prior to in-country arrival. The evaluation team's credibility will be judged by AID country mission personnel, host country officials, and project team members during the first few days in-country. Establishing that

credibility through preparation in order to "hit the field running" goes a long way in ensuring the success of the evaluation.

Phase IV: Expectations and Surprises in the Field

AID personnel, host country officials, and project team members all have certain expectations of the evaluation results. AID officials are anxious to see if the evaluation will support their position on the future direction of AID assistance to the project. Host country officials have agenda items they would like to have the project address through the evaluation results. Project team members wonder if their hard work and frustrations of working under developing country constraints will be understood by an outside team of evaluators. The evaluation team needs to take into consideration all of these various pressures and remain as objective as possible in following the arranged evaluation methodology.

What kind of surprises can the evaluation team expect while in the field? An example from the evaluation of the Ecole Nationale d'Economie Applique in Senegal helps to illustrate this point. On the surface of the project everything appeared to be operating on schedule. However, strong personality problems existed btween key actors in the project which had produced negative project results. It was only after gaining the

confidence and trust of team members that the calm exterior of the project broke down to reveal serious threats to its continuation. Without this information the evaluation would not have been able to address major constraints to the project.

Several other types of surprises can await the unwary evaluator. These may range from philosophical differences to political unknowns which have impacted upon project implementation. It is only through gaining the trust of the people, asking the right questions, and often a little luck that these key information areas can be tapped.

The lessons to be learned in this phase are to remain objective, ask questions, be a good listener, and sometimes to expect the unexpected.

Phase V: The Exit

After the data is collected, the evaluation team must pull together the information and prepare a final draft of the report for submittal to AID. Briefings are usually scheduled for the AID mission, host country officials, and project team members. Constraints to completing the final report include lack of secretarial support or even access to a typewriter, not being able to perform site visits until a day or two before the report is due, and verification of information. There is the usual process of cutting and pasting and, if possible, use of the word processor to revise and edit. It is important to note

that a draft of the final report is usually due several days prior to the final departure to allow for AID comments and feedback.

One caution to evaluators is to understand that not everyone in the AID mission is interested in learning every detail from the evaluation report. The AID briefing may be scheduled for only one hour and should emphasize the report summary and the report recommendations. This lack of time for the briefing can be frustrating to an evaluation team which has just completed a very intense four weeks of work and would like to verbally share details of the evaluation with AID personnel. These details, however, must be included in the evaluation report for documentation and reference purposes.

The only thing after the briefings is to be sure to keep a copy of the report for final revisions, be sure that you have a valid exit visa, a way to the airport, and a good novel to read in the departure lounge. You may even be able to sleep on the flight home.

The lessons to be learned from this phase are to be prepared to meet several deadlines under less than ideal conditions and to possibly receive limited feedback from your efforts.

Agricultural educators have much to contribute to the evaluation of agricultural training projects. The evaluation process can be a very exciting activity leading to increased

knowledge of a different country, exposure to new ideas, an improved understanding of how donor agencies operate in the field, and new contacts to future consulting assignments. Knowing more about the "nuts and bolts" of international project evaluation should improve the contribution agricultural educators can make to the evaluation process.